THE PRIZE

"Will you compete for the human, Spock?"

The young Vulcan warrior acknowledged his friend's arrival and resumed his interested scrutiny of the slave chained in front of the Warleader's tent. Humans were rare on Vulcan--something in the planet's atmosphere, or perhaps the harsh rays of its sun, affected them so that they sickened and died. Spock had heard it said that of each hand-picked cargo only some 40% survived to reach the slave market. Females, he remembered, were rarest of all, being even more susceptible than the males though as a child he recalled a Human female in his mother's service. The males did become available on rare occasions, commanding high prices, and to own one was something of a triumph.

For days the camp had been alive with the rumor that Selon, leader of the warrior band, intendec to produce one of these exotics to be competed for by the trainee warriors under his command; for once rumor had proved true--that very morning the slave had been set on view so that the warriors might see the prize for which they competed.

Spock had never seen anything to equal the strange beauty of the slave he studied now. The Human was male, of course, even if one had been available, no female would have been allowed in the camp or considered appropriate for a warrior, and young, although it was difficult to judge age in aliens. Its hair and eyes were the warm color of the golden wine of the Langoc valley, its skin the exact shade of honey-sweetened cream. The most unusual features were its small, shell-shaped ears and the delicate, crescent-curved eyebrows.

"Compete? I think not," Spock answered his friend at last.

"Why not? You must know that you'd win--and to gain such a prize...."

"Satak, we have discussed this before." The two young men moved aside, slightly apart from the group of warriors who surrounded the slave. "You know that it is my hope one day to be the choses of another equal to myself--to be S'Kanderai. I have no desire for a lesser relationship."

"Yet you've used slaves before."

"In my time of need, yes," Spock conceded. "To save my life I have taken the body of a slave, as I would eat to avoid starvation. But to have a bed slave permanently in my tent, one who cannot refuse my commands, who submits out of fear--where is the honor or pleasure in that?"

"True, though I would not have thought it so," Satak admitted. "Yet I have found much pleasure in a compliant slave."

"It is a purely personal attitude," said Spock, resuming his study of the Human. The youth was indeed beautiful. He stood erect, his head high; the strange eyes were wary, but held no trace of fear as he surveyed his captors defiantly. He was like some spirited animal, Spock thought, a half-wild hunting cat not yet subdued to the will of a master. It would be interesting to tame him.... Then with a mental shake he set the thought aside. No slave, however beautiful, could be the companion, the equal, the lover he dreamed of. No, he would wait.

Spock was just about to suggest leaving when one of the other novices moved closer to the slave, reaching out a hand to ruffle the light hair.

"Like silk," he called to his companions, and continued his exploration over the smooth face, down the column of the neck. The Human endured the examination in silence, but when the Vulcan reached under his tunic he reacted violently, twisting in his bonds and snarling defiance in his own barbaric language.

"Not such a prize after all," Spock said with a nod as they turned away. "The creature is unpredictable, savage, obviously untrained. His new master will have much to teach him."

"Don't you know?" Satak looked at Spock in surprise. "When I was last home my father was discussing the purchase of work slaves with one of the traders. Nareth told us that the Humans are not told what their service will be. They are given only basic training as a body servant--the rest is kept from them deliberately."

"I do not understand."

"Nareth said that on their world males rarely mate--it is considered shameful. So great is their revulsion that when they finally understand, their struggles excite their masters."

"I do not approve," said Spock sternly. "They should at least be warned what to expect, and given time to become accustomed to the thought."

"I agree with you,though many of our people would not. However, it is no concern of ours, since you do not desire to compete. The slave will probably fall to Savak. I do not like him, but there is no denying that after you he is the best warrior in our group."

"Then for the slave's sake it is to be hoped he learns quickly. I do not think Savak has overmuch patience."

The following day Spock joined the others to watch the contest for the Human slave. Satak had declared his intention of competing, but did not seem too disappointed when he was eliminated in the third round.

"It was worth a try," he explained as he joined his friend, and the two stood together to watch the remainder of the contest.

As they had expected, Savak was declared the winner, and Spock watched with impersonal curiosity as the golden-haired youth was led forward and pushed to his knees before his new master. The creature was certainly beautiful, but he was undisciplined, untrained, and--the Vulcan suspected--as savage as a wild sehlat. Spock knew a moment's uncharacteristic pity for the proud spirit that would quickly be crushed, then he shrugged, wondering at himself. Of what importance was the fate of one slave? For himself, he was content to know that he would have defeated Savak had he chosen to compete.